

Pasadena Star-News

Legal services agency expands

By Matt Myerhoff

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PASADENA -- Neighborhood Legal Services, which provides free legal services to the poor, has expanded into the San Gabriel and Pomona valleys, areas with large Asian populations, many of whom speak limited or no English.

Language is their biggest obstacle, but the Asian communities' cultural isolation and service providers' lack of cultural expertise also play a part, said NLS executive director Neal Dubovitz.

And with 13 percent to 15 percent of the Asian population in the U.S. living below the poverty line, NLS services are badly needed, Dubovitz said.

"Although it is a significant part of the poverty population, Asians historically have not been able to participate in the services and programs available to the poor," he said.

From simple telephone advice to complete legal representation in court, the agency provides free consumer, health, family, immigration, housing, public benefits and labor legal services to people who earn under \$1,380 per month.

Legal service providers have long served large Latino populations, who have cultural diversity but share a common language.

"I remember the days when there were only a handful of people in the legal offices who spoke Spanish," Dudovitz said. "Now Spanish and English are interchangeable. Our goal is to have that for the major Asian languages as well."

Before the expansion, only a few NLS lawyers spoke Asian languages, said attorney Rebecca Yee, who was hired by NLS in April 2002 to design and head the project.

"Now we have people speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, Thai, Khmer (from Cambodia), Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and Tagalog," Yee said.

One of the 13 attorneys hired to work with the program is Irene Mak, a family law attorney who speaks Cantonese, Mandarin and Thai.

Mak was a partner at a private law firm before she went to work for NLS two years ago, earning up to \$20,000 less a year working on domestic violence cases.

"The job is more satisfying than the money," said Mak, who grew up in Hong Kong and Thailand before coming to the United States. "I could use my language skills and wanted to give back to the Asian community."

NLS expanded when Legal Services Corp., the federal agency that funds providers of free legal services nationwide, reduced the number of grantees in the Los Angeles area from five to three, Dudovitz said.

NLS won the competitive grant over the Legal Services Program for Pasadena, San Gabriel-Pomona valleys. That boosted its client base from 16,000 to around 25,000, and NLS opened an office in El Monte.